

A Preliminary Consideration of Action-Research as the Framework for  
a Theory of Social Change

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It was not accidental that the founding fathers of modern social science, St. Simon and Comte, were very much concerned with philosophy of history. These men wished to develop a science which would permit them to predict and guide long-run social change. They recognized that the search for pattern in the historical process was essential to such a science. This was an important recognition even though their own formulations were not successful. Their lack of success stemmed in part from their lack of valid quantitative data and in part from their failure to adequately take account of man's ability to re-direct his actions on the basis of past experience.

Today we are developing extensive quantitative data, but in the process are neglecting the significance of historical analysis and thereby losing important insights of our predecessors. We are not, moreover, giving attention to the oversight of our predecessors in regard to examining man's ability to self-consciously alter his actions. The purpose of this paper is to show how the quantitative and historical realms of analysis can be interrelated with the realm of self-conscious action so as to make significant contributions to research and theory about social change.

The interrelation we wish to achieve requires a broader framework or philosophy than is provided by classical social science. We therefore turn to the broader philosophy provided by Action Research. The foundation of this philosophy lies in the recognition that a science of social development involves discovery of not merely what a given society is, but what a given society can become through the self-conscious cooperative action of citizens and social scientists. We will exemplify the philosophy of Action Research and the interrelation of the quantitative, historical, and action realms through an empirical study of an interracial group.

Before turning to our empirical study let us examine certain characteristics of the three realms just mentioned. The realm of quantitative analysis is concerned with abstracting quantifiable variables from an on-going process

and relating them to one another in terms of a hypothesis. The hypothesis specifies that if certain variables take on given values, then, other variables take on predicted values. This type of hypothesis has the advantage of generality in the sense that it is independent of any particular time conditions. We must also recognize, however, that it tells us only about a static state—only about what will happen at a point in time when given conditions prevail. Such information is decidedly limited when we are concerned with predicting and guiding social change. For our interest is then centered not only on what happens when a given set of variables take on certain values, but also on the forces that influence the values of the variables. We wish to know not only what will happen under certain conditions, but how we can affect these conditions by overt actions. In order to gain this latter knowledge we must link historical analysis of group development with a quantitative analysis. We do this by organizing the historical analysis in terms of the same variables used in the quantitative analysis. It then becomes possible to say why certain variables take on certain values as well as what the consequences are of those values occurring. And knowing this, we can overtly enter the social process and help guide it. That is, on the basis of scientific knowledge citizens and scientists can self-consciously act to influence events in a manner not before possible.

The results of self-conscious action can themselves be analysed quantitatively and historically, these new results leading to further action, and so on. We look forward to a continually developing quantitative-historical theory of social change, with the necessity of further theoretical development growing out of self-conscious action. This total process of analysis and action is carried out in the framework of Action Research where scientists and citizens cooperatively endeavor to guide social change.

Let us illustrate our contentions by considering a study of an interracial group. The study involved a neighborhood in a large Indiana city. This middle

to upper-middle class neighborhood has been predominantly white, with a few Negro families settled in one section of it for many years. But during the 1950's increasing numbers of lower-income Negroes began to invade the area. Racial tension and signs of blight began to increase. In the Fall of 1957 a group of long-time Negro and white residents asked social scientists in the Community Dynamics Program of Earlham College to help them adequately guide changes in their neighborhood. The social scientists agreed to cooperate in this experiment to guide social change and also to carry out research on the whole process. Thus Action Research was initiated. We kept records from the very start of the group's development. These records have included narrative accounts of group meetings and actions, letters sent to and by group members, publications of the group, private interviews with group members. Collection and organization of these data were subject to many of the same canons of validity and reliability used by the historian. Our task, indeed, was similar to that of the historian in that we were trying to determine what was "really" going on in the process of group development and action.

In addition to documenting the development of the group, we instituted a quantitative study with the knowledge and cooperation of group members. In 1959 a set of hypotheses was developed, within the theoretical framework of Field Theory, along with a questionnaire to measure the variables or vectors dealt with in the hypotheses.

The basic aim of our quantitative analysis was to identify and measure those vectors in a person's psychological field which would permit us to predict the extent of his activity in the interracial group. The basic aim of our analysis of historical data was to determine how the values of these vectors developed in the psychological fields of group members and how they shaped group development. Let us proceed to identify the four vectors and the quantitative hypotheses, after which we will interrelate these results with our historical analysis.

The four vectors chosen were:

Vector AB: how successful the individual believes the group is or will be in solving neighborhood problems he perceives.

Vector CD: the reference-group support the individual gets for his participation in the group.

Vector E: the role conflict the individual experiences between activity in the interracial group and other groups.

Vector F: the positive commitment of the individual to the dominant function or ideology of the group—in this case commitment to interracial interaction.

Each vector was measured by a section of the questionnaire. On the basis of questionnaire responses each person was assigned a Positive (+), Neutral (0), or Negative (-) value for each vector. For example, a person who perceived Positive group success was assigned a value of +AB. If he had Positive reference-group support he was assigned a +CD. If he had No role conflict he was assigned a 0 E. And if he had Negative interracial commitment he was assigned a -F. The vector profile of such a person would be written in shorthand as: + + 0 -

The extent of a person's activity in the group was based on the proportion of meetings he attended, and was measured on a three-point scale of: High Activity, Medium Activity, Low Activity. Two of the quantitative hypotheses we wished to test were:

Hypothesis 1. If a person's vector profile contains more +'s than -'s, then, this person exhibits High Activity in the group.

Hypothesis 2. If a person's vector profile contains more -'s than +'s, then, this person exhibits Low Activity in the group.

Turning to our data<sup>1</sup> we find that Hypothesis 1 can be accepted at the .05 level of significance. Similarly, Hypothesis 2 can be accepted at the .05 level of significance.

We have now established a relationship among variables which permits us to predict the extent of a person's activity in an interracial group. Our results are independent of time conditions. But what can we say about the forces which influenced the values of the vectors? Our hypotheses tell us nothing about these forces. But our analysis of historical process, organized in terms of the operation of these vectors, tells us much. In order to appreciate the significance of this further information let us turn to our data once again.

We note that the responses from which we proved our hypotheses were made not only by persons in the Indiana group but also by persons participating in an interracial group in a large New Jersey city. Of the 16 Jersey respondents, 3 of them (or almost 20%) show a  $\nearrow AB$ —feel their group is successfully meeting neighborhood problems. Of the 18 Indiana respondents, not one of them shows a  $\nearrow AB$ —not one feels the group is successfully meeting problems. Why do we find this lack of optimism in the Indiana group? Our quantitative hypotheses cannot tell us, but our historical analysis can.

Historical analysis of the Indiana group reveals that soon after its formation internal conflict developed. Two of the very active white members, strongly committed to interracial living ( $\nearrow F$ ), wished to encourage at least some whites to stay in the neighborhood. They wished to slow down the panic selling of white home owners. Two of the very active Negro members, however, feared that their Negro reference-groups would be hostile to such activity and would regard it as an attempt to keep all Negroes out of the neighborhood ( $-CD$ ). These two Negro members, therefore, opposed any direct attempt by the neighborhood group to halt the panic selling by whites. The divergency in view between these pairs of white and Negro members, and especially the lack of mutual understanding of each other's views, led to conflict in the group. The conflict greatly limited the productive activities of the group, and served to depress the value of the vector  $AB$  in the psychological fields of group members. This type of conflict did not occur in the New Jersey

group, partly because the active Negroes in that group were of lower socio-economic status than those in the Indiana group. We expect higher status Negroes to be more sensitive to Negro reference-group pressure.

Our historical analysis of the Indiana group not only presents a developmental picture, but also enables us to see where social scientists and group members might have acted differently and thereby have guided social change more adequately. If the conflict in the Indiana group had been alleviated, for example, the group might have been better able to guide social change in the neighborhood. The conflict might have been alleviated if the analysis we have just made of it had been presented to group members, for the analysis could have helped whites and Negroes better understand each other's position. This better understanding in itself might have lessened the conflict and permitted the group to function more effectively. We do not know that this would have happened. But utilizing our continuing cooperation with group members we can help them now achieve greater understanding by presenting the above analysis to them. We can then observe whether the conflict, which still exists to some extent, is lessened and the group becomes more effective. In other words, we as social scientists can help group members understand their experience and take actions which seem appropriate on the basis of this new understanding. By continuing our analysis of process during the time that these new actions are carried out, we can determine the effect of these actions on group development.

A major argument of our paper may now be summarized as follows. Historical analysis of a group (or society) makes a vital contribution to scientific guidance of social change because it provides scientists and group members with the insight necessary to initiate new acts of guidance and the techniques for evaluating the effects of these acts. The benefits of historical analysis are fully realized, however, only if the analysis is organized around the development of variables

that have been quantitatively proven to significantly determine the growth and actions of the group and only if persons use this information to act in the social situation.

If we accept the orientation just presented, we have prepared a broader foundation for a theory of social change. This theory is now concerned not only with what will happen if events develop in their "natural" way, but what will happen when social scientists and those he is working with attempt to strategically interfere with "natural" events. We suggest that an adequate theory of social change will contain in addition to sets of quantitative hypotheses, propositions about the patterning of events in time including the events of self-conscious action. Precise formulation of such hypotheses and propositions will probably follow in the wake of increased systematic Action Research.

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## NOTES

1 Table I

Results from the New Jersey Interracial Group as of August, 1959

Code No.	Vector Profile	Extent of Activity		Errors
		Predicted	Actual	
201 NF*	--- 0 + 0 +	High	High	-----
202 Wn	--- + + 0 +	High	High	-----
203 Wn	--- 0 + 0 +	High	Medium	----- 1
204 Wn	--- 0 + - +	High	High	-----
205 WF	--- 0 + 0 -	Medium	High	----- 1
206 WF	--- 0 0 0 +	High	High	-----
207 NF	--- + + 0 +	High	High	-----
208 Wn	--- 0 + 0 +	High	High	-----
209 WF	--- + + - +	High	High	-----
210 Wn	--- 0 + - +	High	High	-----
213 Wn	--- 0 + 0 +	High	High	-----
219 WF	--- 0 + 0 +	High	High	-----
222 Wn	--- - 0 0 0	Low	Low	-----
229 Wn	--- - 0 0 -	Low	Medium	----- 1
237 NF	--- 0 0 0 +	High	Medium	----- 1
239 WF	--- 0 0 - -	Low	High	----- 1

Results from the Indiana Interracial Group as of December, 1959

5 Wn	--- 0 + 0 +	High	High	-----
8 WF	--- 0 0 0 0	Medium	Low	----- 1
9 WF	--- - + - +	Medium	Medium	-----
11 NF	--- 0 0 0 0	Medium	Medium	-----
12 Wn	--- 0 0 - +	Medium	High	----- 1
15 WF	--- 0 0 0 +	High	Medium	----- 1
16 Wn	--- 0 + - -	Low	Low	-----
18 WF	--- 0 0 - -	Low	Low	-----
19 Wn	--- 0 0 - -	Low	Low	-----
22 Wn	--- 0 + 0 0	High	High	-----
26 Wn	--- 0 0 - -	Low	Low	-----
33 Wn	--- 0 + - 0	Medium	High	----- 1
35 Wn	--- 0 0 - 0	Low	Medium	----- 1
64 WF	--- - 0 - 0	Low	Low	-----
82 Wn	--- 0 0 - 0	Low	Low	-----
84 Wn	--- 0 + 0 +	High	Medium	----- 1
86 Wn	--- 0 0 - 0	Low	Low	-----
99 WF	--- 0 + - 0	Medium	Medium	-----

\*NF = Negro female. Wn = Negro male. WF = white female. Wn = white male.